

A STIPENDIATE'S VISIT TO THE INTERNATIONAL YOUTH LIBRARY—MUNICH

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I had the unique opportunity of being at the International Youth Library, Munich, from April 1 - May 15, 1993, and delving into the wonderful treasure chest of children's literature there. Under the stipendium programme of IYL, not less than a dozen stipendiates go there during the course of a year and make use of the valuable books in the library to work on their own specific projects concerning children's literature. Mrs. Manorama Jafa, Secretary-General, Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, had introduced me to this programme and encouraged me to apply for the same in 1990. After a long wait, I heard from IYL that my application had been honoured. I would actually be going there for six full weeks! I jumped with joy.

Accompanying me was Girija Rani Asthana, whose visit had also been sponsored by AWIC. The subject of my project was - *Panchatantra in Other Languages of the World* while Rani's was *Research on Indian Children's Literature in English Speaking Countries*.

The IYL is a delightful place to work in. It is located in Blutenburg Castle on the outskirts of Munich. This historic building used to be the King's hunting lodge in yesteryears. The idyllic surroundings, a lake with swans and ducks, the undulating meadows and farmland beyond and a peaceful stream meandering along, take one's breath away. The castle, modernized from inside, has the administrative wing on one side and a narrow, cold passage leads to the library of secondary literature (research material) on the first floor. Directly below, on the ground floor, is

the large stack hall of primary literature or books for children. There is also an underground stack hall or 'magazin'. On the other side is the children's lending library, a 'mal studio' or a painting classroom for children, and a couple of halls used by children for performing arts or art exhibitions. Sandwiched between these two wings on either side are a church, a restaurant, the lodgings of the house master, and an apartment where a couple of stipendiates are accommodated. The central lawn is fringed with apple trees, and outside the massive iron and wooden castle gates stands a cheerful cherry tree.

The stipendiates work in the secondary literature library, where each is given a well lit spacious table and a comfortable chair to use as his own during the period of stay. A glance around the library and one is amazed to see the shelves full of books, all pertaining to children's literature the world over, supplemented by a comprehensive catalogue. 'Children's literature is not a lesser form of literature', after all.

Here, in this library one begins to believe that children's literature has really come of age, and is recognised as a genre in itself. In the primary literature section, the world of books for children comes out in all its variety, colour and beauty. Children's books from publishers in different parts of the world pour in here. At the same time, IYL gets the latest and best books for children from Bologna and Frankfurt book fairs, annually. A part of these go to the lending library and the rest are to be used for reference by stipendiates and other research workers.

The spillover of books gets stacked in the warehouse situated at a ten-minute walk from the library. The children's lending library is also well stacked with books in many European languages. There is a separate section for the juniors consisting of a large number of picture books, attractive and colourful. Children throng the library in the afternoons, specially on holidays. There is the vast collection of more than half a million books stacked away at IYL in Schloss Blumenburg, a castle of the 17th century serving a noble cause of the 20th century. The ever expanding IYL will soon have a computer system for accessing, cataloguing and documentation of the library's collection in order to meet the increasing demands of children and youth services, cultural, educative and recreational.

As I staggered amidst this mighty stack of books, the friendly librarian led me to my table and introduced me to the catalogue, so that I could get started with my work in right earnest from day one. As my project is a study of the fable for children, with special reference to the *Panchatantra* and its impact on world children's literature, I began with some general reading of research books and journals that talked about folk literature for children from the world over. The more I read, the better I realized that the world recognizes India as an ancient seat of folk literature and that there is a brief reference to the *Panchatantra* more often than not. But that is about all. Mention is made of the ancient researchers and translators of the *Panchatantra* like Benguey, Burzoe, Nerbe and Edgerton. But the *Panchatantra* as such has not seeped into children's literature of more recent times as have the stories of other fabulists like Aesop, La Fontaine and so on. We, as Indians, strongly feel that the *Panchatantra* is the origin of the fable culture and tradition, and that it has migrated and influenced fabulists and story-tellers in different corners of the world, which is what I would like to bring out in my work. In fact, when I had to

introduce myself to the gathering of the IYL staff, I had to spell, write out and explain not only my long name but also the *Panchatantra*. Children's literature of Europe today has to be updated about the *Panchatantra*, I felt.

For the best part of each working day, I was lost in the realm of children's literature. The more interesting part of the study was when I began to read folk tales from different countries, new and old, with a discerning eye, to catch any resemblance to the fables of the *Panchatantra*. Right from Chaucer's tales to Uncle Remus' stories, or African tales and Chinese, all contained animal tales resembling the *Panchatantra*.

In the course of time, the variety of books on the shelves was so tempting, that it became almost impossible to stick to one's project work with a one-track mind. There was so much more to read and enjoy! I could browse through the books of well known children's writers and illustrators. Moreover, magazines on children's literature from other parts of the world had a lot to discuss on a variety of topics pertaining to children's literature viz. story-telling, choosing books for children, the history of comics and their impact on children, how children enjoy picture books, folk tales, realism like death in children's books, what young adults enjoy reading, and so on—all well researched articles with a stamp of authenticity. All this in a single world language—English. If one could only read and understand German and French, there would be tons and tons more to read! There are 'lektors' in the library in various languages like Italian, French, Spanish, Romanian, English and German, of course, who were ready to assist and guide the stipendiates and help out briefly with our language difficulties, if any. The stipendiates amongst themselves too, were only too ready to offer help to one another, languagewise or otherwise. Stipendiates could be not only authors, but also teachers, librarians, research scholars, illustrators, editors and so on.

My exhibition of 'Tales from *Panchatantra*' in various Indian languages aroused a lot of interest and curiosity at IYL. If there had been a press release about it, people from downtown may have come to see it. But that could not be arranged.

A visit to the city library was interesting. There are a large number of public libraries all over the city, of which this was the main one. All of them have a well equipped children's section as well as a young adult section that lends out books as well as games and cassettes. In today's culture, the circulation of the latter is comparatively larger, and comics, which are not lent out are well thumbed in the library premises. Books are mostly in German, but there are books in other European languages, and English, as well. All books are bound volumes, and well maintained.

An enriching experience was a visit to the 'Happy Sick Room', a children's library in a children's hospital. A trolley of attractive books is rolled in and out of the wards by two librarians who take a lot of interest in the sick children, pep up the inpatients with books, and have an admirable emotional rapport with the kids. The library is more than ten years old now and works as a therapy for the sick child. Even the doctors show a lot of interest, and have regular meetings with the librarians to discuss individual cases.

All TV programmes were fortunately or unfortunately in German. So, my eyes could be

disengaged from the idiot box, and some regular reading could be done every night. It was enjoyable—a long forgotten habit, since back home one gets so tied up with other family matters that there is hardly any time to read. Weekends were exclusively for sight seeing, which again was a pleasurable experience.

A meeting with the director, Dr. Banbara Scharioth, and the director of library operations, Dr. Andreas Bode, made me realize that they are very interested in India and in trends in Indian children's literature today, of which they know very little. They are eager to strengthen their ties with people from India working for the cause of promoting children's literature, and reading habits amongst children.

A fond farewell to all the staff of IYL on the last working day, May 15, wound up the show. Back to home sweet home on May 17. In retrospect now, the trip seems almost like a dream. Just six weeks! However, this period is enough to do a particular amount of clear-headed study provided one is sure about his or her scope of study there, which means that the individual is already working on a project, and goes to IYL for some specified reference work to further his research. IYL provides the use of the photocopier to stipendiates, which makes it a lot easier to collect relevant reference material quickly. I have more references to collect for my work from libraries here, in Delhi, to catch the Indian angle before concluding my research.

Children's books create worlds which are entered by each child who reads them; they are created out of the worlds in which their authors and illustrators live.

Judith Weedsan